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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to stimulate scholarly investigation of a conflict systems model for news media and the interaction of sources in the wake of an expose. A search of the literature led to nine tentative axioms that focus attention on systemic conflict of media and sources related to cover-ups and suggested additional theory development. Synthesizing and extending concepts from journalism, public relations, political science, psychology, and other behavioral sciences, the study illustrates a holistic social science approach to an area of public relations concern. The conflict systems model described operates at several levels: intermedia competition, intramedium competition, competition on the same organ of media, news sources/media conflict, and conflict among and within news sources. Some of the implications of systemic conflict that are examined include escalation of conflict, aggravation of latent preconditions, and stress. The speech communications concepts of pathological trust and suspicion are applied to press relations systems. (Author/AEA)

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A HEURISTIC MODEL OF MEDIA CONFLICT SYSTEMS IN THE WAKE OF EXPOSÉ OF COVER-UPS

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ABSTRACT

This study was initiated to open up to research the dynamics and processes in the aftermath of cover-ups and to stimulate scholarly investigation of the fit of a conflict systems perspective to news media and sources interaction in the wake of exposé.

Secondary research, aided by interactive computer search of the literature, led to nine tentative axioms, presented in this paper to focus attention on systemic conflict of media and sources related to cover-ups and to prompt additional theory development.

This paper, however, goes beyond reporting secondary research to synthesizing and extending concepts from the literature of journalism, public relations, political science, psychology, and other behavioral sciences. In bringing together, reframing, and building upon these concepts, the study illustrates a holistic social science approach to an area of public relations concern.

Although the focus is upon systemic implications as related to exposure of cover-ups, the paper presents a systems orientation to news media and sources behavior that may be useful beyond the scope of this study.

The model operates at several systemic levels: inter-media competition, intra-medium competition, competition on the same organ of media, news sources-media conflict, and conflict among and within news sources. Some of the implications of systemic conflict are examined, including escalation of conflict, aggravation of latent preconditions, and unleashing of passions within the media, news sources, and publics in conflict systems.

The paper examines stress as a manifestation of, and contributing factor to, increasing systemic conflict. And it extends from speech communication the concepts of pathological trust and pathological suspicion to press relations systems.

Presented to the Public Relations Division,
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INTRODUCTION: TOWARD MEDIA BEHAVIOR PREDICTABILITY

As part of the quest for greater explanation, understanding, and predictability of new media behavior in the wake of exposure of cover-up activity, communications scholars may find heuristic utility in examining exposé coverage dynamics and processes from a conflict systems perspective.

This proposal springs from a synthesis of concepts from the literature of public relations, journalism, speech communications, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, political science, and other social sciences in a holistic approach to cover-ups.

And it flows from theory building in which conflict theory and general systems theory were wed to create a conflict systems framework for analysis of news sources and media actions and interactions in the aftermath of cover-up exposé.

COVER-UP DEFINED; CONCERN CITED

For purposes of this paper, the word "cover-up" will refer to those strategems devised by an organization, leader, and/or agent to conceal or distort information that would be disseminated through the news media with the intent of minimizing or preventing embarrassment and adverse effects feared by the source.

The concern behind this paper is to help equip public relations teachers, students, consultants, and practitioners with empirically-based arguments against cover-ups.

Analysis of the literature in a related study[1] suggested that the treatment for cover-up symptomology lies in going

beyond philosophical teaching, recitation of the partial history of consequences of exploded cover-ups, and reports of credibility studies to the examination of the dynamics and processes that may be anticipated under the circumstances of cover-up and of the obverse of cover-up.

Understanding of the dynamics and processes may help put the risks and rewards of covering up and opening up in a new light. The key challenge in 1979 appeared to be to open up to research the field of cover-up dynamics and processes. At the same time, the challenge is to suggest patterns of factors to guide researchers in developing hypotheses. At this early stage, however, it may be argued that caution be exercised in moving too quickly to closure by testing hypotheses rather than moving on a programmatic basis from axioms to hypotheses to testing.

In opening up a field to research, one of the greatest responsibilities of the researcher may lie in synthesizing and bringing to bear the knowledge already related by scholars, researchers, and practitioners.

In a systems concept sense, this paper focuses on relations among the various actors, the parties to media-exposed cover-ups, and what they bring to cover-up interactions.

It may be suggested that cover-up behavior, once discovered by organs of the media, fuels a diversity of conflictual processes among the media, source, and media-source systems that may become agitated in the aftermath of exposure.

TENTATIVE AXIOMS VS. TESTABLE HYPOTHESES

Tentative axioms, such as the following, invite challenge, refinement into testable hypotheses, and ultimately, subjection to the crucible of scientific research. But at this juncture, they are presented to focus attention on systemic conflict inputs to cover-up exposé processes and prompt dialogue that may lead to theory development.

Axiom 1: The greater the aura of apparent secrecy the press perceives, the greater, longer, and more innovative will be the efforts to break through to what is concealed. (This is aided by internal pressures that may result in unlikely leaks.)

Axiom 2: Lies, or perceived lies, once they become apparent to representatives of the media, will relate to cynicism of the press and public, even in accepting as truthful normally unquestioned information relating to the perpetrator.

Axiom 3: Discovered or perceived efforts to thwart by honest means, as well as trickery, the media's pursuit of a story they seek, may increase the intensity, duration, and innovativeness of the pursuit and even lead to attacks on third parties seen as getting in the way.

Axiom 4: The more information the press perceives is being held back from it, the greater will be the intensity, duration, and innovativeness in attempting to gain information and the more likely that the search will spread to other sources.

Axiom 5: The more new angles the press is able to extract on successive days of a breaking story, and this includes information in response to questions, as well as investigative reporting, the more likely that the story will grow in terms of space/time allotted by the media and prominence of display in a particular format.

Axiom 6: A curvilinear relationship may be expected between the competitive situations provided for media access to information and the intensity, duration, and quantity of coverage given a breaking story. It is suggested that the least coverage generally will be given in situations providing for little intra-medium competition and the greatest in situations providing for exclusive coverage by one organ or mass coverage by all principal media.

Axiom 7: The greater the competition among the media, the more prone they will be to accepting unverified information, making mistakes, and expanding the base of information to be explored.

Axiom 8: The greater the competition among the media and between the media and source of information, the more the opportunity for tempers to flare and for conflict to escalate with the possibilities of increased errors and biases building on both sides.

All this may suggest that cover-up behavior, once discovered by organs of the media, fuels a diversity of conflictual processes among the media, source, and media-source systems that may become agitated in the aftermath of exposure.

INTER-MEDIA COMPETITION: MEDIA AS A SYSTEM

This paper accepts the definitions and assumptions about systems presented by Berrien,[2] together with Weick's proposition that "any organization is the way it runs through the processes of organizing" and "these processes, which consist of interlocked behaviors, are related and form a system."[3]

One may argue that wire services, newspapers, news magazines,

radio, and television news are interlocked in behaviors from a general standpoint of their roles in selecting, developing, presenting,and transmitting news and from a standpoint of their relationships within their supra-system of media, news sources, and consuming publics.

Competition may be defined as a subset of conflict in which incompatible actions reflect incompatible goals. And, as Deutsch wrote:

> A conflict may arise from differences in information or belief. . . . It may reflect differences in interests, desires or values. . . . It may occur as a result of a scarcity of some resource such as money, time, space, position. . . . Or it may reflect a rivalry in which one person tries to outdo or undo the other.[4]

If one substitutes media, organs of the media, or even individual journalists on the same organ for "person," the description could apply to media systems conflicts. With a bit more extension, the description could be seen to apply to conflict between media and news sources, or even among news sources as they compete for the resources afforded by the media.

If access to information, for instance, is limited, as it may be in the on-going process of exposure of a cover-up, conflict within and among media (as well as between media and news sources) may escalate. White and Leigh pointed to the irony of this area of conflict in noting that news persons don't want equal access per se because it "would reduce every story to a mass press conference or a mimeographed handout . . . what they want is an equal opportunity to use their wits to create <u>unequal</u> access."[5] Yet, as Danzger found in his research, "restrictions on the movement of reporters make them dependent on the accounts of others,"[6] a process that may favor distortion, errors, and spreading of false

rumors. Limited access also may be seen as contributing to the competition for exclusives, as Stein indicated when he wrote of a media executive "under pressure to go further than his competition, to give his customers exclusively what they have not read or seen or heard before."[7] Such competitive pressures may lead to overkill on some stories, it was added.

Pressures of competition may apply to a journalistic tendency at times of "shying away from the novel" as some attempt to reflect values and norms with which they are familiar, according to Roberts.[8] Further along the continuum may lie the so-called herd instinct: Crouse and the American Institute for Political Communication,[9] for instance, had accused pre-Watergate Washington press corps members of herding in maintaining a low adversary profile in covering the White House beat during the Nixon Administration. And Trombley[10] found the herd instinct at work in his study of press conferences.

If the press may be seen as so sensitive to the norms and behavior of component media sub-systems, one could derive the implication that a challenge to the system, in the sense of withholding or distortion of information furnished reporters, may make a story a journalistic cause. Another implication is that the more editors and reporters become aware of coverage by competing media, the greater may be the temptation to increase coverage.

Even between such diverse news media as daily papers and television, systemic competitive forces have been observed. Mass media critics such as Shaw[11] and Furlong,[12] for instance, have reported heavy influence of major newspapers on how television handles the news.

One implication is that coverage by one medium (or the prospects of coverage by one medium) may tend to bring in one or more of the

other media. Another notion that may be advanced here is that inter-media competition may be manifested in taking out frustrations and aggression arising out of conflict on a third party, the news source, which may be seen in some situations as catering to the other medium's needs at the expense of the medium that feels slighted.

Another example of inter-media competition was noted by Shaw, who reported an "intensification of competition" between news magazines and daily papers "to be first on major stories."[13]

Although dissimilarities of news processes and focuses might seem to make competition unlikely among the different kinds of news media, it may be suggested that conflict for advertising revenue, peer recognition, and esteem of news consumers spills over into the handling of news.

INTRA-MEDIUM COMPETITION

The agenda leaders of the news media, the national wire services, serve to set agenda for intra-medium competition for incompatible goals of being first with news stories or angles. As a former AP reporter noted, the AP and UPI are "unbelievably competitive."[14] This model of competition may lead, however, to "hurried wire service stories (that) are not just premature but downright inadequate," according to one media critic.[15] Yet, Hohenberg has noted that "between them they cover every American daily worth of the name, the television networks and stations, the news magazines, and all but the most insignificant radio stations" with about three fourths of the news.[16]

Among daily newspapers, competition has shifted in recent years to battles for survival for less economic publications,

for advertising and subscription markets between big city organs and suburban challengers, and/or for national prestige.

A question raised by White in his study of gatekeepers for daily newspapers remains unanswered: "Can a wire editor play down a story when he sees competing papers from nearby metropolitan areas coming into his city and playing up the story?"[17]

An example of the competition for national prestige among dailies may be found in the conflict between the Washington Post and New York Times, as indicated in the jockeying for position for revelations during the unfolding of the Watergate affair[18] and by such studies as that of Sesser.[19]

An implication to be derived from the intensification of competition among the prestige dailies suggests that a news source that favors one newspaper over another or leaves enough potential news angles hidden to spur investigative reporting may contribute to stepping up of the conflict and, thus, an intensification of investigative efforts by staffs qualitatively and quantitatively strengthened to dig out more faster.

Another implication is that as the competitors for national journalistic prestige serve to legitimatize each other's coverage of an event by verifying the validity of the newsworthiness and repetition of "facts," other newspapers and their staffs may be drawn into the coverage system, including its escalation of competition.

In addition, what may be dubbed as the "top gun effect" may come into play. In this analogy to American Western lore, smaller newspapers and relatively unknown journalists may seek out

opportunities to show up the top guns of investigative reporting (the Post and Times).

Just as some journalists look to the wire services and national prestige newspapers for their perspectives on news, many news persons from the various media follow the analyses of the news magazines, particularly Time and Newsweek.

And just as the pursuit of exclusives is typical of a number of newspapers, MacDougall noted a similar drive in the news magazine field and, perhaps, an aspect peculiar to journalists in that medium: "Newsweek likes scoops and likes to make news."[20] Beyond the implication that the news magazines may provide agenda setting for news media follow-through on stories they have covered already, or continue to cover, this suggests that the competition of the larger news magazines may add to the digging out of details missed by others.

It may be said that the intra-big city daily newspaper competition of the first half of the 20th century has been replaced to a degree by the conflict of the television networks and powerful independent stations for ratings of news shows. The news director of the CBS television channel in Los Angeles, for instance, was quoted:

> I'm looking for a good, aggressive newsroom to get out and cover the community and be competitive. The station that has the news image is the station that will win in the ratings. That may sound crass, but that's the yardstick we're judged by.[21]

COMPETITION ON SAME ORGAN OF MEDIA

Taking competition down yet another level, one may discern competitive systems acting in the same organs of the media (newspaper, news magazine, wire service agency, network, channel, or station).

And what transpires at this level influences (and, in turn, is influenced by) inter-media and intra-medium competition.

Although journalists compete with their counterparts in the same medium or other media, perhaps one of the more intense forms of conflict is with those closest to them, just as more intense interpersonal conflict occurs among families and friends. Coser discussed the latter form of conflict this way:

> . . . (W)e may say that a conflict is more passionate and more radical when it arises out of close relationships. The coexistence of union and opposition in such relations makes for the peculiar sharpness of the conflict.[22]

The scarcer the resources within a competitive system, the greater the potential for conflict. And, for purposes of this paper, scarce resources may be said to include the esteem of significant others (editors, publisher, fellow journalists) within the organ; the awarding of bylines or air time by superiors; the placement of the report in prominent position in the news format; the length or time of the report; and such conventional organizational resources as promotion, bonuses, merit pay increases, authority, trust, support services, and the like.

When two or more persons from the same staff are assigned to different aspects of a story, a continuing story on alternate days, or news beats that overlap, the competition for scarce resources may influence the time, energy, ingenuity, tenacity, and other investments they may make in the pursuit and processing of information.

The New York Times reporter who was the first to break the My Lai massacre story and who was a primary investigative reporter on Watergate said:

> Look, I'm a cynic about what we like to call the public's right to know. I think we basically write for each other. It's an ego thing, and this is the bitchiest business going, so

> there's plenty of envy and jealousy and nitpicking when you beat everyone on a good story.[23]

That editors, not just reporters, on the same newspaper vie for scarce resources for their respective staffs was given support in a report by the Los Angeles Times media critic.[24]

One may suggest that perceptions of the competitive byways and policies of an organ of mass communication may be in the nature of self-fulfilling prophecies, that journalists, for instance, may perceive more than they should but that by adding to the drive to be first with their own effort, they help set new policy as others see their contributions as symbolic of what the editors or publishers want. Likewise, a story on a given topic, such as cover-up exposure, may serve to indicate to other members on the staff that more of the same would be in keeping with the unwritten policy perceived by journalists as they become socialized to their roles and staff norms.

STRESS AND MEDIA CONFLICT

> In addition to the distortions arising from the pressures for self-consistency and social conformity, the intensification of conflict may induce stress and tension beyond a moderate optimal level and this overactivation, in turn, may lead to an impairment of perceptual and cognitive processes in several ways . . . .[25]

And the life of the journalist, as well as the citizen described above, particularly the news person who engages in investigative reporting, adversary journalism, or coverage of stories sources would rather hide or downplay, is stressful.

The potential for stress may be particularly great when journalists on cover-up exposé assignments have worries over missing big stories, getting wrong information, having a story rejected, facing threats of libel suits, and the like. To this

may be added the pressure of media deadlines, a critical consideration in the race against time to be first with the news (or an angle thereof). Deadline pressures was one of the factors, together with carelessness, typographical errors, reliance on second-hand or third-hand information gathered from sources who refused to be named, and intense competitive pressures, identified by Lewis[26] among causes in the "fumbles of journalists" covering the first phase of Congressional Watergate hearings. The rush to be first to break a news story may risk incomplete or inaccurate information for a reporter who Shaw said may be reluctant "to check with as many sources as he should, for fear that other reporters will learn of his inquiries or discover the story on their own in the interim."[27]

NEWS SOURCES-MEDIA CONFLICT

As Weaver explained it, a sharp decline in intra-medium competitiveness of daily newspapers in prestige news markets "quietly but effectively shifted the balance of power between newsmen and sources" for:

> . . . their newsmen felt constrained to maintain friendly relationships with sources so that their opposite numbers would not get "exclusives"--and sources, as consequence, could "whipsaw" newsmen to keep them in line. When . . . leading newspapers no longer had any true local competition, their newsmen became less beholden, and sources became relatively weaker.[28]

Mortensen's[29] transactional paradigm proposes the existence of persons particularly sensitive to incompatible tendencies in their own thought processes, persons with a disposition to conflict. To extend his concept a step further, one might say there are institutions that are conflict prone. And source-media conflict, even including a source that had nothing to do with the cover-up

but which became associated with a perpetrator after exposure, may take place against a backdrop of traditional conflict. It is suggested here that traditional conflict not only may apply in phases of relations between the news media and government (or other institutions of society), but also that the roots of press exposure of corporate corruption, immoral or illegal practices by powerful institutions, abuses of power, and social ills lie deep in the history of American journalism, such as in the muckraking era earlier in this century.

The symbiotic relations of many news sources and media in relatively friction-free interdependence have been cited in a number of articles and books.

But, Wise noted that "the changing relationships and growing tension between government and the news media" developed as the "greater degree of interdependence" gave way under the cumulative impacts of the U-2 spy plane and Vietnam war cover-ups.[30]

Deutsch[31] limited his discussion of pathological suspicion and pathological trust to individuals in interpersonal communication. By extension, however, one may conceive of the principles of these pathologies as applying to parties to news media-sources conflict. Perhaps, the interdependence may have prompted degrees of pathological trust by the news media before exposure of cover-up, a trust that may have given way to pathological suspicion in the wake of exposure.

It may be observed that because media may reflect, as well as affect and interact with, their consumers' cyclical waves of trust and suspicion in leaders and institutions (even the institution of the press), a shifting from one pathology to the other might tend

to be slow in developing, but hard to reverse or slow once momentum begins to build. The author suggests this as a partial explanation of why public opinion polls and the media coverage of the perpetrator of a cover-up may be slow to change from trust in the initial phases of exposé. But when the shift from trust to suspicion gets underway, coverage may tend to snowball and cynicism mount with the waves of suspicion sweeping beyond the boundaries of the cover-up incidents.

In the elasticity of what is a person's or organization's privileged information and the public's (and media's) right to know, and in the related clash of Constitutional guarantees and rights, and in the other aspects of competition of forces for the rare resource of information, the issue has the makings of a potent and divisive agent in a struggle with moral, as well as legal, overtones.

A number of other factors in the news sources-media systems may impact upon the processes and dynamics of coverage in the aftermath of exposure of a cover-up, including denial of access to information, attempts to suppress news or intimidate, history of relations, secrecy-mystery perceptions, credibility of parties, and more. On another systemic plane, one also may consider the impact upon media and media-sources systems of competition at the inter- and intra-source levels.

A discussion of media-sources and inter- and intra-source conflict systems concludes:

> Altogether, it may be seen that vulnerabilities of primary news sources to leakage of information they would rather hide and that pressures of media to help spring leaks

> may combine to open up trickles and eruptions that even master plumbers may be unable to fix.[32]

IMPLICATIONS OF SYSTEMIC CONFLICT IN COVER-UP AFTERMATH

The springing of leaks in the aftermath of the breaking open of a cover-up represents only part of the potential for conflict systems as coverage builds to a crescendo and continues in a crescendo-plus plateau of media and public interest.

One of the byproducts of source cover-ups in an escalation of conflict may be the creation of whole new stories of interest to media and their publics. Over time in an exposé build-up, media specialists and investigative reporters may be freed from other stories and sped to the scenes of action. Their new perspectives, in turn, may provide fresh grist for the media mill.

The dynamics of series of reports also may create what may be called a "coverage feeding upon coverage effect" similar to what Ingram found in his study of investigative reporting in a series of stories on a school board controversy:

> In an attempt to keep the momentum going, the reporters kept grinding out pieces, just to show that the story was still alive.[33]

Weiss found correlational evidence that "preexisting interest" by news consumers "may lead to exposure and thereby be sustained or even strengthened; and continued or increased exposure may be induced by the stimulated interest" in his conclusion that it is likely that interest and exposure "each affects the other, once exposure becomes continuous."[34]

Long-running stories, thus, may be seen to focus, if not add to, public interest and media coverage activities. Edelstein and Tefft[207] also found that long exposure was related to increased credulity in the media and decreased credulity in President Nixon

in their Watergate study.

It may be hypothesized that the competitive forces and other dynamics in the news processes related to cover-ups will tend to provide for redundancy across the channels of mass and interpersonal communications as well as in repetition of basic themes of media coverage.

Redundancy, thus, may be a key to some degree of attitudinal shift, as perceived early on by Alexis de Tocqueville in his study of the press and American Democracy:

> Its eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders of all parties to the bar of public opinion. It rallies the interests of the community around certain principles . . . When many organs of the press adopt the same line of conduct, their influence in the long run becomes irresistible, and public opinion, perpetually assailed from the same side, eventually yields to the attack. In the United States each separate journal exercises but little authority; but the power of the periodical press is second only to that of the people.[35]

When conflict is not resolved, Pondy[36] proposed that the latent or underlying preconditions to conflict may be aggravated, with the potential of an even more explosive conflict in the future.

Perhaps the bitter prolonged conflicts inherent in extended coverage of cover-ups and their aftermaths unleash new passions within the media, news sources, and publics in the conflict systems, just as Lippmann[37] warned when he noted that man tends to repress base instincts, but when they are loosed with social sanction--and this takes time to do--they are hard to subdue.

A NINTH TENTATIVE AXIOM

If appeals to philosophic truths and religious morals

fail to impact adequately on those who perpetrate cover-ups, perhaps an understanding of the processes and dynamics set in motion by conflict systems may be more effective. This leads to Axiom 9:

That although a source with a reason to cover up may take some bruises away from first-day media coverage following prompt, full, and open disclosure of painful information, that the in-and-out, crescendo-only story will appear more attractive than the protracted and increasing beating one can take in the public eye day after day, week after week, when a cover-up leads to crescendo-plus coverage.

Contemplation of the options presented in this axiom might lead to an even less painful choice--avoiding the actions one may be tempted to cover up.

#

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